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MCC Conference – September 2002

Text II – “Spirit and Queer Healing”

Yesterday morning, we were offered some very interesting insights from my colleagues, Irene and Joe, about the connections between sex and spirit, and also about the role that the body itself – more specifically that wonderful experience called the orgasm – plays in the equation. I shared with you some observations with respect to desire and devotion, and how the two are intimately connected. I remarked that this was a lesson we learned from life itself, sometimes at a rather early age, from the multitude of ways in which we discovered our erotic choices and our spiritual vision, and from the fact that the impulses of both often have a common source and inspiration.

I came across a quote recently, which I thought expressed this rather beautifully and succinctly. The author, in fact, is speaking of pornography in the late Ming dynasty in China. He says: “Desire, as a central arena of human experience, can become a field of spiritual cultivation. As a tool of self-knowledge, desire can lead to salvation.” For me, body and spirit are one, and I don’t mean this in a simplistic, New-Ageist kind of way. Rather, I mean that my passionate, erotic hankering after another desirable human body (however that may be defined) is, at heart, a quest for the sacred. It is in the touch of another, and in its regular cultivation, that I discover the touch of the holy. This truth is as old as the hills, though regrettably forgotten – a bit too conveniently, I might add – by our religious traditions, particularly those of the Christian variety. In fact, all aspects of the human experience can become venues for spiritual enlightenment.

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The thought crossed my mind that you would welcome some clearer indication of what ~~all this fine talk~~ might mean for you concretely as pastors and leaders, in your everyday spiritual counseling and your important parish work with LGBTQ communities. Let me briefly suggest some possible paths. First, your spiritual guidance and counseling needs always to consider the intimate and vitally compelling links that exist between sexual identity formation and spiritual development. By this, I mean that one's religious attractions can hold cues to one's erotic proclivities, whether these be same-sex or not, and the reverse may be equally true. Take a look at me and ^{St.} Dominic Savio, for example. It should therefore have come as no surprise that I grew up to be the queer boy that I was, and moreover one (though hopefully more mature) now working in the area of gay spirituality.

Second, I think we need to be much more accepting, in our spiritual counseling, as well as in our homiletics, of the wonderfully charged messiness and anarchy of human desire. In my life, I have not heard very many ministers or priests preach the complete and unconditional acceptance of the full spectrum of human desire from their pulpits. We – you – should remember this. The MCC, and you as its pastors, are already fully accepting and affirming of this spectrum. But how comfortable are you – or any of us, for that matter – with obsessive human desire? Not very much, I would venture to guess. Yet, this is often the place where spiritual vision and focus, if appropriately channeled, are discovered.

Third, and this is more of a warning than anything else, remember the body. As open as we may consider our particular Christian denomination to be when it

comes to human bodies and what we do to, with, and in them, there is always an incipient dualism of good versus bad in our theology, and very often we are not fully conscious of it. This dualism can contribute, at times, to a subtle judgmental positioning with respect to the uses to which human bodies are put. Religion, as with politics, try as they may, still have a hard time leaving human bodies totally unto themselves. That's because uncontrolled human bodies are unpredictable, and thus liable, at times, to question existing power arrangements, or to simply cast aside empty moralistic standards. This may sound a tad anarchistic, but who ever said the gospel message was not?

I simply offer these three points for further reflection on your part, hopeful that they might spark some self-critical analysis, individually and collectively.

now
I want you to close your eyes for a moment. Imagine yourself, touching, ever so gently, the person next to you. If you prefer, do it, though you don't really have to. // Perhaps that person really needs your touch because she or he is having a bad day, or just broke up with a long-term partner, or is sick with some AIDS-related infection, or maybe they or you are secretly attracted to each other.

Imagine that you are extending that same touch to everyone in this room. Stop and think how that might feel. // Now, I want you to be bold. Go back in history. Think of some occasion or incident involving the persecution and ostracism of someone for same-sex behavior, or of you as a willing participant in some act deemed equally suspect, deviant or illegal. Perhaps it is Oscar Wilde at his public trial for sodomy, or the burning of some poor old woman for witchcraft in a small German village, or a secret orgy in Puritan America or British India, or

perhaps you are standing in chains at the distant court of some African or Asian overlord, awaiting your condemnation for some powerful cultural taboo you *may* have broken. Perhaps you are in jail, or in a concentration camp, or in a park late at night, or in the shower room of an exclusive private girls' or boys' school. I am sure each of you can conjure up a hundred different images and sensations, several of which you no doubt prefer to keep to yourself.

Do you feel elated? Angry? Perverse? Empathy? Titillation? Proud? Defiant? Solidarity? I suspect all of these, and more. Above all, I would wager that there is a sense of recognition or identification, of something held in common.

You have just experienced the queer touch.

I do not know how many of you are familiar with an amazing book by queer historian Carolyn Dinshaw, published in 1999. It is called Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern. Two years ago, the Lesbian-Feminist and Gay Men's groups of the American Academy of Religion co-sponsored a panel on this groundbreaking work at their annual meetings. In her response to the panelists, Carolyn Dinshaw had this to say about what she tried to do in her book: "Developing queer history through the concept of affective connection – a touch across time – and through the intentional collapse of conventional historical time, I wanted in Getting Medieval to help queer studies respond to (...) desire. In fact, I intended to make affect central to the project of queer history writing; this would, I contended, further the aim (shared by me and other restive historians of sexuality) of transforming history writing altogether. It would queer historiography."

If you have read the book, you will know where the title comes from; if not, and if you happen to be a film buff, it might ring a faint bell. The title is taken from a line in the 1994 blockbuster movie "Pulp Fiction," where one of the characters, after shooting another in the crotch, who had raped him earlier, and who is ^hwriting in pain on the floor, says: "Hear me talkin' hillbilly boy? I ain't through with you by a damn sight. I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass." The expression "git Medieval," which has passed into everyday parlance, taps into all that popular culture associates with the feudal excesses of the Middle Ages. Clearly, it also touches upon sodomy as both act and symbol, and upon what Dinshaw calls, rather beautifully, "the abject others," those, like us, who have been seen as marginal and sexually deviant, and therefore expendable, down through history.

One of the members of the panel was Mark Jordan. You ~~are no doubt on speaking terms~~ ^{may know} with his extraordinary work in the area of homosexuality and religion, through such books as The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology and, more recently if decidedly more controversial, The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism. One of Jordan's central themes is that historical categories of sexual being and behavior are, at their source, theological constructs, and, moreover, that we should be very careful about assuming too readily their entrapping rhetoric. As he so perceptively puts it, echoing the insights of Michel Foucault, "Modern sexuality is churchd before it is born." In his comments on Dinshaw's book, Mark Jordan had this to say about her notion of "affective connection" (and I quote somewhat at length):

"... claims for transhistorical touch are by no means the invention or property of queer historians. When a medieval Christian woman touches Jesus, speaks to his mother Mary, or is counseled or scolded by his Apostles, she moves within that transhistorical system of identities that is called the assembly, ecclesia, church – the body of Christ. If she herself were later "raised to the altars," canonized, she would become a point of touch for all later believers, a declared member of the communion of saints. When I am called a "gay Catholic" – or so call myself – I am placed within at least two communities that make claims for touch across time. Indeed, the Catholic claims are much stronger than the claims of the queer historian. Not a Catholic touch, but a Catholic grip. One traditional Catholic claim is that I can not only touch, but eat the body of Jesus. Another is that there is only one time for God – and that we anticipate our entry into this eternal moment by liturgy and vision. So the touch of the queer medievalist must be protected

not from the skepticism of positivist historians and philologists, but from assertions of much stronger transhistorical continuity within church communities.

“The scientia sexualis of Christian pastoral rhetoric is in reality not a science, but an art, a series of rhetorical or theatrical programs that elaborate and impose scripts for the performance of moral identities – most powerfully and consequentially, identities of sexual grace or sexual sin. I have been speaking of the sodomite, but we should remember as well the Lascivious Widow, the Witch, and the Self-Abuser – who was a figure of theological imagination before he (less often, she) was an object of clinical attention. Against such sin-identities, we can place the Angelic Monk, the Virgin Martyr, the Chaste Wife, and the Priest with Pure Hands. When I reach out to touch the bodies of these figures, I touch theological artifacts. I touch them still when I touch the body of a modern “Homosexual.””

When I heard those last two lines (“When I reach out to touch the bodies of these figures, I touch theological artifacts. I touch them still when I touch the body of a modern “Homosexual.””), I was hit full force with a mixture of recognition and pride. Maybe it had to do with the eloquence of the phrase, and the image it conjured up. “Boy,” I quipped ^{to myself,} “have I ever touched a few theological artifacts in my day!” Jordan’s text is meant, of course, as a warning against assuming uncritically the identities which others, particularly churchly powers, want to impose on us. But at another level, his keen and appealing observations about touching all these identities – the sinful ones, that is – across time and distance stir up powerful feelings of recognition and community.

I want to appropriate Carolyn Dinshaw's "affective connections" and Mark Jordan's "sin-identities" for our discussion this morning. I want to explore with you what "a touch across time" might mean when it comes to our spirituality. For just as the queer historian seeks to make affective connections with others she or he recognizes as being similar, the better, ultimately, to subvert a heterosexually normative reading of history, so we, as queer persons engaged in defining, supporting, and celebrating a queer spirituality, need to link ourselves with those sexual others, the "abject" ones from our past and from different cultural sites, in order to call into question the theologically orthodox, and, most importantly, to heal and to bind together individuals and communities.

I do not want to open the essentialist-constructionist debate. Some will argue that a homosexual or a lesbian in medieval times or in a non-Western culture is not the same as a lesbian or a homosexual at the start of the 21st century in North America, and they are quite correct. What I want to speak of is something that goes beyond surface differences: the spark of recognition, affinity, attachment, kinship, congruence, vraisemblance, as we say in French. Affective connection: the thing that allows me, a well-off, middle-aged North American self-accepting gay man to reach out and call a poor, young, medieval European sodomite monk burned at the stake, or a working class German homosexual persecuted and killed by the Nazis at Dachau, my brothers.

We have all felt the power and spooky wonder of recognition and affinity. We even have a funny word for it: "gaydar." It usually refers to our innate ability to tell if someone else is really queer. Gaydar, or a queer affective connection, a touch across time, is also when

I can read the stories of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple or of Mary of Magdala in the Bible and know instinctively what they mean, and how disturbing they are of established sexual and even religious values. It is when I can take an obscure reference to some perverse sexual or other form of deviant deed in an early Christian text, or a Medieval one, or even one from the 20th century, and find myself reflected in it, as though I knew exactly how, why, and where something ~~was~~ ^{were} done. Gaydar helps me see same-sex desire in painting, theatre, or poetry where others choose to see nothing but their own reflected heterosexual beauty and normativity. A queer affective connection is how I see through things, people, and events, across them, under them especially, and sideways from them. Things off-kilter and ever so out-of-place. It is how I make sexual connections that others cannot even begin to guess at. Above all, a queer affective connection makes it possible to discern historical others like me. And to do so because, ultimately, their desires, as conditioned as they may have been historically and culturally, are very much like mine. Yes, we have been everywhere, at all times, and under all circumstances.

When you think about it, there really is something wonderfully spiritual about this way of understanding our connections with others: something empowering, and ultimately quite liberating. It reminds us that, despite our very real and significant differences, we remain a trans-historical, trans-cultural, trans-erotic community. The one important trait we have in common is our desires, our devotions. As we all know, spirituality is ultimately about connections – with each other, and with the source of life. What the notion of a queer affective connection also does is validate our experience of sameness, as diffused and indeterminate as this ^{sameness} may be. Such a connection is all about touching others like me.

Carolyn Dinshaw spoke of her will to “queer” historiography. Well, each of you in this room, in your ministry and witnessing, “queers” spirituality every day. The MCC is all about “queering” religion. I “queer” religion (and the academy also) every time I teach or write about how it intersects with homosexuality. We are all engaged in a gigantic, wonderful process of “queering,” of re-discovery, of re-appropriation, and of re-naming. We are all helping to shift the paradigm. One of the truly splendid things about being in this line of work, about doing this kind of thing, as I am sure you will agree, is not only the intense personal satisfaction, but, more importantly, the sense that we are not doing it alone, that all these disparate queers out there, all of us, “queering” and subverting things, have ultimately got to make something happen. It’s more than a hope. It’s a certainty.

So much for my daily inspirational moment. Let us now look more closely at the queer touch, at the affective connections we so often and so innocently make. Some months ago, I struggled with a haunting though difficult book by James Alison called Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay. Some of you may know it. I will admit that I do not find James Alison easy. Beautiful and powerful, yes; easy, no. If you know him, you will know that he is a dense and an intense writer. In this particular book, his most recent, following his standard borrowing of René Girard’s paradigm of mimetic violence, Alison issues a strong challenge to queer Catholics (and, by extension, all queer others) not to engage themselves with Catholic rhetoric on homosexuality because, he argues, it repeats the destructive pattern of mimetic violence, and Christ himself refused to engage with it. Hence the title: Faith beyond Resentment. He uses an expression which just blew me away, because it’s so true. He calls it “unscandalised human desire.”

In his last chapter, entitled "Nicodemus and the boys in the square," he paints a fantastic and amusing portrait of a world in which the Grand Inquisitor, the Church hierarchy, is made to confront its teaching on the homosexual question. It is well worth a read, if you have not already done so. In this same chapter, he has this to say: "Jesus did not feel a need to run away from the world of sinners. He does not feel threatened by the world of rent boys, nights on the heath, dark rooms, saunas, and so on. He doesn't need to, since he is at peace with human desire, and thus able to see those worlds for what they are: worlds in which people are capable of being reached and touched by a love which may not even pull them far out of those worlds. It may teach them careful and responsible brotherhood for others in the same world, a gradual and non-scandalised unbinding of their desire where they stand."

Yesterday, we spoke of desire, of the manner in which it merges with, and touches upon, the holy. Let me, in the spirit in which Alison writes about human desire, add a further *thought*. ~~refinement~~ There is no need to scandalize ourselves with this ^{green} desire, as far out, obscure, revolting, or ^{indeed} scandalous as it may be. It is simply there, fully human in the extreme. If we allow ourselves to be genuinely touched – not scandalized – by it, then the response of the man Jesus will also be our response. *Desire is really love in emergence - the green touch about to burst forth.*

One of the things that I truly like about Alison's writing is the manner in which he uses scripture, the way he bends it and transforms it in such a queer way. I'm not really a biblical theologian, so I can't do it as knowledgeably and with such class. But, with your indulgence, let me try and apply my own queer touch, if I may. Though I know I am on

slippery terrain, if only because my hermeneutics are no doubt considerably more rusty when compared to yours, I will look at one of my favorite passages from the scriptures, the encounter on the road to Emmaus. It is not a long story, though it clearly has an air of drama to it. I like it for several reasons. Two of my favorite artists, Caravaggio and Van Gogh, painted wonderful renditions of it. It is constructed on ambiguity and mystery, so I can look under and through it. It is all about physical, tactile things, about a handsome stranger, and about food: in a word, the Eucharist. And, yes, it's about three men in a room. Who knows what can happen?

You know the story from the Gospel of Luke. Two disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus, when Jesus, unrecognized, appears among them. They are disheartened, for they had heard of the risen body of Christ which could not be found. Jesus scolds them mildly, calling them "foolish men" and "slow." He then explains the prophecies to them, presumably as a way of building links with his own ministry. Slow as they indeed were, they still have not recognized him. Evening approaches. As they near Emmaus, they press him to stay with them, the rule of hospitality requiring so. He does, and, as they sit down to eat, he breaks bread and blesses it. They immediately recognize him, but he has disappeared from their sight. They then tell each other, in words that I find especially suggestive, if not downright seductive: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?" They return to Jerusalem to meet with the assembled apostles, who are presumably still in their ^{state of} post-crucifixion hiding. The passage ends with the following words: "Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognized him at the breaking of the bread."

This is the classic eucharistic tale. Its beauty lies in its intimacy. Who were these two disciples? Friends? Brothers? Lovers? They appear to live together. A mysterious stranger suddenly joins them on the road to Emmaus. How do they react? Though the gospel says that Jesus explained scripture to them, what else do they discuss? They ask him to share their room and board for the night. Did they pick up the attractive stranger, invite him for more than simply breaking bread? As they sit down for the evening meal, they sense something about to change as the stranger repeats the paradigmatic eucharistic invitation: "Take my body, eat." When they finally clue in, their one recorded comment *and*

response is of "hearts burning." This speaks to me very directly and beautifully of love and desire, of the powerful attractiveness of the unknown, of the strong and heady mixture that is the enigmatic. I would venture to say that there was touching on the road to Emmaus as well as in the home of these two lost and frightened disciples. I like to think that they were walking hand-in-hand on the road to Emmaus, that the arrival of the stranger only served to heighten the intensity of their attraction to each other and to him, and that the shared meal was but a prelude to something far sweeter and more desirable, something that would provide them ultimate comfort and reassurance in their dark moment of doubt and uncertainty. As the stranger suddenly disappears, after perhaps more than symbolically offering them his body to ingest, they are left in awe and gratitude, sure and confident.

This is my queer version of the Road to Emmaus story. One other reason why I like it so much is because I have a queer Emmaus of my own, a tale also having to do with discrete touches and the cry for community at the heart of unspoken desire. It is a story of three friends, a cup of wine and some bread, and a late-night sleep-over.

In my novitiate days, when I was only seventeen and preparing to launch on my chosen path as a religious with the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, we were always decrying the fact that our community life was lacking in intensity. There were three of us, who, no doubt due to some youthful enthusiasm, decided we would create our own sense of community. We naturally gravitated together, partly because of personality, but also, in hindsight, because of some unspoken sexual chemistry. I was from Canada, and the two others came from Montana and Wisconsin. My friend from Montana and I are gay. The third friend from Wisconsin, who was really a ^{little} endearing farm boy at heart, charming and with a slightly corny sense of humor, ended up as a diocesan priest, but died from some horrid brain tumor some years ago. I'm not sure if he was gay, but he may have been. Or at least, I'm hoping he was. He had one of the most perfect bodies I've ever seen on a man, no doubt due to the exertion of lifting all those bales of hay. It was both an aesthetic and an erotic experience to watch him carry ~~it~~ *his frame around*.

We would meet more or less regularly, often late at night, to share a Eucharist of our own. I've written elsewhere about these moments. "We gathered in the evening in one room. Sitting on the floor and holding hands, we prayed together, and we recounted the experience of our day. We shared a reading from Scripture. A chalice and a host were placed on the floor, and one of us recited the priestly words of consecration as the other two bowed their heads. We drank and ate the body and blood, embracing one another. It is strange, when you think about it, that we should have felt the need to copy the ritual of the Catholic mass in a setting that was already heavily imbued with such ceremonies, almost as though we were unsure of the value and validity of the real thing. We believed

we were duplicating the intimacy and the conspiratorial intensity of the early Christians. When we were finished, we sometimes decided that we would “sleep over,” and we would lie on the hardwood floor holding hands. There was never anything sexual about it. For us, there was a seamless fit between the eucharist we had just shared and this expression of our comradeship. It was all right; it made sense.”

You have no doubt picked up on several parallels with the Emmaus story: three men, three disciples, in a room; the breaking of bread; the sharing of scripture; the search for intimacy and understanding. What I recall most vividly, however, is the tactile sense of touch which surrounded the whole event. I mean touch in the spiritual, the emotional, and the erotic sense. There were different levels of bonding and touch between us: the friendly bonding of religious brothers in community, the bonding caused by spiritual intensity and vision, and finally, but by no means least, the bonding from desiring and desirable bodies in close proximity to each other. We chastely held hands while reciting the words of consecration, but we also did so while trying to fall asleep on the painfully hard floor. I know what my touch on the floor was about. It was, as with the Emmaus disciples, all about “burning hearts.” It was about the engrossing image of my friend from Wisconsin in his immaculately white briefs and chiseled chest as he got undressed. One false move, one shift, and my touch would have gladly turned perverse. But, sad to say, it never did.

I believe there is a deep line of queer touch – jagged perhaps, but still there – from my novitiate experiment to the moment of revelation at Emmaus, and back again. It is the

same queer touch that links me and my desires to those of thousands of other nameless and speechless perverts and sinners down the obscure byways of history. It is the same queer touch, the same affective connection, that binds me to Oscar Wilde on the witness stand and to the young clerical faggot tied to the enflamed stake, as it is the one binding me to the Beloved Apostle leaning on the chest of Jesus, or to the adulterous woman, or, more contemporaneously, the Sapphic cravings of older, unmarried aunts of mine or of yours. It is the queer touch that builds communities and that, ultimately, heals our broken hearts. It is the affective touch of queer human solidarity and recognition. Though the line may indeed be jagged or even faint in parts, it is still inscribed deeply and boldly.

The Reverend Nancy Wilson, someone you just might happen to know, expresses this sense of trans-historical queer affective connection quite perfectly in a passage from Our Tribe. She is describing the opening worship service of her first meeting of the National Council of Churches, a difficult and unsettling occasion. “Suddenly, sitting in the last aisle in that huge church, I realized some things. The NCC and I were (are) the same age (we were both 31 at the time). I thought of all it had taken to bring us together at this moment in history. Suddenly, I sensed them in the room: gay men and lesbians through the ages. In the churches, burned by the churches, persecuted by the churches, serving the churches, loving and hurting. They were there. They knew I was there. I had this overwhelming sense of a mystical communion of gay and lesbian saints, some of whom had served this council in its better days. I wept for them and for us, for their longing, pain and shame, for their need even now for vindication and for a voice. And I felt so small, and young, and inadequate. But also so loved and watched over by them. From

that moment until this, they have never left me. And many thousands have been added to their numbers.”

In this moving passage full of visual delights, Nancy Wilson highlights two of the more important aspects of the queer touch: empathy and solidarity. She is able to feel love and pain for those who have gone before, those who, despite the struggle and the suffering, have remained in faithful communion with their religious tradition, hence the empathy. She is also called and lifted up by them, and she finds strength and support in this sense of a common trans-historical identity and purpose, hence the solidarity. What is more, this solidarity remains in the present. It continues to inspire, comfort, and sustain her.

You have no doubt felt some of this in your line of work, as I have in mine. Every time I take pen to paper to write something else about what it means to be gay and religious, or that I reflect on spiritual experience with a distinctively gay sensibility, I am deeply and gratefully conscious of my connection to all those – past, present, and future – for whom I may be speaking: those who, for whatever reason, have never had a voice, or who may choose not to exercise it. And I am comforted, humbled, and empowered by this thought. In fact, I could not do what I do were it not for them. For as with you, mine is a calling to service and witnessing, and the nobly visceral solidarity I feel from our common position of sexual marginality – whether that be a historical or a more contemporary fact – is what keeps me afloat, what keeps me, in fact, wanting to do this, *as I'm sure it does you.*

When we appropriate history, and, by extension, its moments and symbols, we also heal.

All of you in this room are certainly doing that with religion, arguably one of the more

guilty parties when it comes to human pain and suffering. We do it together when we claim that queer people are not cursed in the eyes of the godhead, but that they may, in fact, be invested with a unique spiritual outlook and calling. Ultimately, I am convinced that we are all in the business of healing, whether we be queer historians, queer activists, queer clergy, queer theologians, or queer anthropologists. We heal in several different ways. We heal by drawing lines of queer affective connection from ourselves to queer historical others. We heal by reminding ourselves and the normative other that we have always been there, still are, and will ~~definitely~~ ^{defiantly} remain so. We heal by making the all too pernicious symbols and rites of oppression – the pink triangle, for example – the source of our pride and defiance. We heal when we uncover and celebrate difference and queer oddness. We heal when we claim the love of God for outcast others like us. We heal when we touch – gently or with a grip, as the case may be, sexually or otherwise – the broken queer body.

In touch is power. In the queer sexual touch is erotic power. And in the affirmation of this power is found the locus, not only of self-acceptance, but also of compassion and solidarity. I turn to our great teacher in the uses of the erotic, Audre Lorde. In her now-famous yet still provocative essay (dating from the late '70s, believe it or not), she writes beautifully and convincingly of the special power of the erotic in women's lives. I want to acknowledge this, because I certainly do not want to appropriate inappropriately. But I believe her words also speak eloquently to our life experience as queer persons. We need to hear her afresh. Listen, and I strongly suspect that you may hear echoes of your own desires or those of others, waiting to be summoned forth.

“We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance.

“When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

“In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

“(…) And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.”

And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good essay or teaching a good class and moving into sunlight against the body of a man that I love.

I daresay that what binds Nancy Wilson's churchly ghosts to her is the subtle touch and power of the erotic. I know, for a fact, that what bound me to my two companions in the novitiate was the unspoken power and touch of the erotic. I like to surmise that what united the three figures in the Emmaus story was the exquisite touch and power of the erotic. Let me be so bold as to assert that what binds me to all the male saints of my religious cravings and fantasies and, above all, to the broken male body on the cross, is the redemptive power and touch of the erotic. As with Mark Jordan, every time I still touch the desirable and desiring body of a modern homosexual, I touch religious erotic power. What is more, I touch a sin identity. Yet, in the affirmation and celebration of that sinful touching, I somehow manage to heal both my broken self and the broken body being touched. What the queer touch does, ultimately, is affirm wholeness and integrity.

Sexuality – or more precisely, the sexual act – is quite naturally all about touch: the touch of hands, lips, genitals, eyes even, fully aroused human bodies in the throes of intimate communion. But then again, so is spirituality. Though the touching may appear less obvious, therefore requiring a more refined sense of perception, it is still there. It is there in the breaking of the bread and in the eating of the divine body. It is there in the sharing with others, in the holding of the tired hand and the wiping of the burdened brow. It is there in the moments of personal peace and tranquility, when we seem to be at one with the forces of the universe. It is there, finally, in times of doubt, when touch disappears.

The healing power of the erotic touch is something that we have all felt at some point or other in our lives. Whether it be in the urgent yet transitory moments of sexual union with strangers, or in the messy glory and wonder of a couple's make-up sex, intimate communion with the aroused body of another being makes us feel renewed and complete. Most, if not all, spiritual traditions also understand the sexual act as a privileged moment for an encounter with the divine spark, the divine countenance. They also talk about how the merging of opposites – male and female, that is – mimics the creative act and taps into the complementarity of the diametric. As a gay man, I have always felt alienated by this type of language, as though my erotic attraction to those of my own gender was not something coherent or consistent with the morality of the universe. This is precisely what traditional Roman Catholic teaching on homosexuality, for example, by its lofty though oppressive discourse on natural law and our own so-called “objective disorder,” teaches. This is so ironic, coming as it does from an institution itself so immersed ^{at present} in a crisis of confidence stemming from deeply unresolved sexual angst and panic.

Same-sex erotic desire affirms the value and integrity of sameness, of one body giving itself to another – the same as its own – through the touch and language of what is held precious in common. The queer touch of which we spoke, the affective connections, are most powerfully felt when we touch others bodily like us in their historical form and presence. One of the more precious lessons we can teach religious institutions is the spiritual value and beauty of same-sex erotic cravings, of how they partake, in their affinity and congruence, of a universal impulse toward a synthesis, not of opposites, though that remains necessary, but of equals.

For gay men, one of the exquisite facts of our sexuality is the manner in which the line between friend and lover, potential or past, is so easily and so readily blurred. It says a great deal about our understanding of the erotic as a site of intimacy and union, though it also speaks eloquently of our belief in, and need for, bonding with other men as comrades and companions on the journey. Friendship is a wonderfully precious gift, as women have been teaching us for centuries. In Out on Holy Ground, I called gay male friendship "that special gift." I also wrote:

"Gay men approach sexuality in its multiplicity of forms as just so many latent sites for experiencing wholeness and transcendence in their lives. Because sexuality is such a privileged venue for the expression of human physical intimacy, if not always emotional intensity, it is more potentiality than actuality. Gay friendships, on the other hand, seem to operate in the reverse. Either they are the result of a sublimated and therefore transformed erotic desire, or they are erotic desire fulfilled in the most inclusive and absolute way possible. That is why so many gay friendships begin as sexual encounters, and why they often last so long. The erotic dimension, vital to the sustenance of genuinely passionate human communication, is never totally absent. It acts as a current, keeping alive the promise of sexual communion. The holy is encountered in the pangs of desire, but it is equally experienced in the delicacy of friendship."

The range of our relationships as queer people – whether of friend, lover, companion, or mentor – is truly wondrous and delightful. These are all opportunities for us to touch across time, to establish queer affective connections. The touch is not only or exclusively

trans-historical. It is very much in the here and now, and we do it in so many fine and subtle ways. I was once told that I ^{*when teaching,*} flirted with my class. The image may strike us as strange, but that is, in fact, what good teaching is all about. The Greeks understood well the necessary connection between pedagogy and desire, between erotic hunger and the hunger for learning. When you preach, you flirt with your congregations, just as I do with my classes when they are particularly good ones. The imparting of knowledge is essentially an erotic enterprise, a sublimated dance of seduction, which is why I believe so strongly that queer people make such wonderful mentors. The erotic is never very far from our field of vision. Standing here this morning, I certainly hope that I was able to seduce you, though we stand as mentors one to the other.

The queer touch. The touch of healing, and wholeness, and seduction, and sinful delight. The affective connection of erotic sameness and delight. The visceral, vital, and intimate connections between me and you as 21st century queer people and our ancestors on the burning pyres and on the witness stands, in the camps and in the gulags. What this touch does is establish connections between us, through and across time, of communities of the abject. I say this with pride and wonder. But this is also an intensely erotic touch full of desire and longing. It is a touch of spiritual potential, as much as it is one of unfulfilled physical intimacy and hunger.

The Spirit uses our hunger for its purposes, and she indeed does so in mysterious ways. I never made love with Oscar Wilde, and I'm not sure I would or could have had I lived in his time. But in my mind, he and I have touched and caressed abjectly time and again, *as, in many ways, have I done so with the man from Nazareth. Call me fickle.*